

We miss the naturalness of our life

Report of 10th Meeting of the Child Survivors Germany from March 29 to April 3 2005, in Berlin-Schwanenwerder. In: Hidden Child 9/2005

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In Germany several events have been organised in which victims have been able to report as witnesses of suffering and death through persecution and KZ. Since this has taken place 60 years after the end of Fascist rule, what these witnesses fear is that within a few years they will be either dead, too old or too weak to talk at such events. Then there would be no witnesses, and it would be more difficult to support and encourage responsible engagement against neo-nazi activities. Therefore many witnesses are ready to talk about the Shoa, when they are invited as Child Survivors to talk in schools. There they report to young people about a time, when they themselves had been young, some very young; so the impact is immediate and they leave a lasting impression.

At the same time it is not easy to communicate the entire truth, because many witnesses, even after 60 years, suffer from the lasting impact of their traumatic experiences, suffer nightmares and depressions, which occur rather inside with a character of intimate affairs, and thus often get a rather limited empathy within their surroundings.

But they try, and they do not just talk about suffering as "far away", but rather as too much alive for themselves. At the same time of course they feel, that this message and knowledge is much less alive in the political debate. Exactly these witnesses are startled by the current toleration of neo-nazi political activities and violent acts in Germany. While there are governmental countermeasures, these are insufficient. Even in some mainstream political statements and media, fascists who publicly act in the tradition of genocide and persecution are accepted and tolerated, in a way to "prove" a basic "democratic tolerance" over a broad gamut of viewpoints. The consequences are that there are fascists in parliaments, and an improvised integration of muslim and fascist voices and acts of violence against Jewish life.

Though the situation is currently "under control" in Germany, it represents a grave threat that is dangerously present, and damage can always occur on an individual level. At the same time, there are some civil voices of rather older people in Germany, who want to "put an end to the debate about German guilt". The official view is a deliberate refusal of such an end of debate, and has been accentuated in a well-directed speech of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Horst Koehler, at the ceremony for 60th anniversary of the end of war at 8th of May 2005, where he put main emphasis on: "There is no end", and pointed out the special responsibility of German citizen, to avoid all the various crimes, as had been committed by the Nazi regime.

It is before this background, that witnesses of the Holocaust tell about their experiences. That is quite a challenge. In some cases schoolchildren have expressed little interest in the crimes of the fascists, which occur to them as events "long ago". While some teachers are prepared to deal with such phenomena, some are hesitant or quit entirely. It is against this background, that during above mentioned events witnesses have to confront and handle tough questions. The result is encouraging, young people are grateful to be informed by witnesses in both an objective and committed way, and they then become very aware of the common important task to fight fascism. The role of witnesses is unique. But with increasing age, only a few witnesses are strong and eloquent enough, to stand up publicly to these challenges. But there are still today some very impressive witnesses, able and dedicated to fight fascism.

Several of these witnesses founded the association of "Child Survivors Germany e. V." in 2001, after they had been active in different organisational contexts. They are part of the "World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust". On their recent 10th national meeting, this time held at the Educational Academy of the Protestant Church at Berlin-Schwanenwerder, they talked intensely about current political challenges, and suitable countermeasures. Of course they were aware of the history of the Schwanenwerder island, where several fascists, among them Joseph Goebbels, had "acquired" a villa from Jewish owners for enforced very low prices.

As a small organisation "Child Survivors Germany e. V." cannot really organise a broad public movement, but rather offers the expertise of those members, who have the guts and experience, and still have the ability to stand up publically. They will not only inform the public, but also deal with tough questions. Actually in most cases young German persons are very sensitive and have respect for witnesses. But not all are perfectly willing to be considerate and to act thoughtfully.

At the same time every member of the German Child Survivors suffers from the well known long term after-effects of their terrible experiences during the period of fascist rule. Therefore the tenth meeting at Schwanenwerder had a basically therapeutic purpose. The members have lost former family members, in some cases in 1945 they had been the only survivors. Thus the association has been providing and promoting a kind of new, genuine family feeling among its members. It is the only place where members need not proffer extensive explanations to explain the intimate and unique characters of their own sufferings, for they understand each other at first instant, especially regarding present reactions to old traumatic moments, which they share as their common basic experience, even if each of them differs with regard to particular details.

When engaged publicly as time witnesses, the Child Survivors will succeed in achieving some understanding, or a greater degree of empathy, for the desperate situations experienced in a concentration camp, or the ongoing anxiety and frustration in insecure hiding places, such as described in the diary of Anne Frank and in the book "Zu niemand ein Wort" (to nobody a word) about Cilly Peiser, who presides over the association with Jewish wisdom and diplomacy. It is much more difficult to communicate current feelings derived from former traumatic experience, even though the phenomenon is quite commonly known, as observed for instance with the "vets", the veterans who had served as soldiers in Vietnam and gone through terrible situations.

The Child Survivors have in common the fundamental feeling, which forms a corresponding common attitude: "We miss the naturalness of our life". It shows in individually varying manifestations, such as never ending restlessness, lack of assurance, ongoing depression and an anxiety triggered by minute causes. A nervous alertness never ends.

Remarkably many manage their life quite well regarding jobs, their own private sector, relations with their own children, and partly also in view of participation in societal activities. But inside many carry some irrational guilt feeling: "Why did I survive, and others not?" It creates an obligation, which is hard to live up to, given the accompanying everlasting feelings of powerlessness and helplessness caused by deeply traumatic situations. While some actually retreat into themselves, others feel a strong obligation to engage in politically effective projects against fascism or violence in all of its forms. Quite a few would rather like to retreat but still force themselves to partake in public activities. All have in common traumatic experiences which do not allow them to experience the naturalness of life.

Given this background it has been a great pleasure to become informed about projects, which provide some hope for the future. Young German, not Jewish ladies presented "YAD-RUTH", a private club from Hamburg, whose members visit the utmost poorest Child Survivors, survivors of the holocaust living now in the poorest European countries, such as Moldavia and Lithuania. They donate very well received gifts and give much needed encouragement. Another project is "Kreuzberger Initiative against Antisemitism", which organises events to present time witnesses, and informs for instance Turkish and Arabic schoolchildren about fascism.

I would like to mention, that there are many similar initiatives. Actually a week later, at April 8 - 10, 2005 a conference "NS-Opfer entschädigen - NS-Taeter bestrafen" (Compensate Victims of German Fascism - Punish Culprits of German Fascism) was held at Humboldt University, Berlin. The organising committee included institutions such as "Support for Survivors of Nazi Persecution International" (Baltimore/Cologne), and another 26 institutions and groups, mostly leftist, engaged in bitter accusation of the limited German compensation politics, especially regarding hard labour, and also the lack of German prosecution of culprits.

Furthermore at the "10th Meeting of the Child Survivors Germany" an impressive scientific institution was presented, the "Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung der TU Berlin" (Centre for Research about Antisemitism), which provides publications in English such as "Studies on Modern Antisemitism". It sees itself not just as a mere research institute, but rather as a means of engaging in an effort to inform the greater public about manifold aspects and dangers of antisemitism. An empirical study, which can be seen as part of resistance research, covers the German helpers, who did hide Jewish individuals in order to save them. While they did succeed in many cases, still in other cases their protégés did not escape the holocaust, and of course the helpers were endangered themselves. 2900 data sets were created for cases in Berlin. Likewise helpers may constitute more than ten thousand throughout Europe, an impressive number in view of the fact, that every personal fate was dramatic, and the dangers were large. At the same time the number is definitely low in view of the millions of cases, where Jews did succumb without any attempt of help forwarded to save them.

A discussion at the 10th Meeting revealed numerous experiences of Child Survivors with German civilians who tried to create the impression that they would have helped, while apparently they never did. Like a mother-in-law of a Child Survivor, who reported: "My best friend was a Jewish woman", but when asked where this Jewish woman would be now, the answer was quite indifferently: "I have no

idea." It was evidently a fabric of lies which further pains the heart of Child Survivors, and makes them keep together. Of course on the other hand there have been numerous valuable good encounters with empathetic German persons, and very welcome public support in individual cases.

A difficulty that lies in the way of all attempts to avoid future disasters, similar in kind to holocausts, is that they threaten to occur in completely different shapes, take on different manifestations, and are therefore not easy to detect and to control. This makes the sensitive alertness shared by the traumatised members of a society such as Child Survivors especially valuable and important for the future survival of society. Child Survivors are characterised by the coincidence of their own inner insecure feelings as a result of having been severely hurt on one hand, and a deep awareness of the own, quite unique, utmost sensitivity in the face of intolerance in societies on the other hand. It will accompany them throughout their lives, and hopefully will accompany the historical experience of mankind into the future.